

FISHERY MANAGEMENT PLAN or REGULATORY AMENDMENT PROPOSAL
North Pacific Fishery Management Council – Steller Sea Lion Mitigation Committee
Provide the following information – attach additional pages as necessary:

SSL Proposal 12/27/07

Name of Proposer: H&G Environmental Workgroup Date: December 27, 2007

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Fishery Management Plan: BS/AI groundfish

Brief Statement of Proposal: Allow directed fishing for Atka mackerel in two discrete Bering Sea areas from 10 to 20 nm to increase the fishing grounds available to the Eastern Aleutians/ Bering Sea. This will allow the fishery to continue to place a relatively large portion of the mackerel TAC into the Eastern Aleutians/Bering Sea management area (AI 541) which has been done in recent years. This benefits the fishery and reduces catches of mackerel in Central and Western Aleutians where the sea lion numbers have continued to decline.

Objectives of Proposal (What is the problem?): Our objective is to gain additional fishing grounds for Atka mackerel fishing in the Aleutian Islands sub-area 541/ Bering Sea mackerel fishery. A greater percentage of the overall mackerel TAC has been allocated to Sub-area 541 (Easter Aleutian Islands and Bering Sea) in recent years. For the fishery to harvest this increased portion of the overall Atka mackerel TAC in AI 541/Bering Sea, additional fishing grounds are needed. To do this, SSL regulations would need to be modified to allow directed fishing for Atka mackerel from 10 to 20 miles at the Bering Sea rookeries and haulouts listed below:

- 1) Unalaska/Bishop Point and Akutan Island /Reef Lava
- 2) Unimak Island Akun Island./Billings Head and Unimak I./Cape Sarichef.

The figures below shows the actual areas where Bering Sea directed mackerel fishing occurred prior to the regulations that prevented access to these areas in 2001. The fishing areas are indicated by the little red fish in the bottom figure. The figures also list the rookeries/ haul outs that are currently closed to 20 miles which we propose to open between 10 and 20 miles. These fishing areas are both important to the ability to maintain a Bering Sea mackerel fishery. Akutan/Akun (area to the west) is relatively more important than the Unimak/Cape Sarichef area to the east. Under this proposal, up to 50% of the AI sub-area/ Bering Sea (541) TAC could be taken each year in the Bering Sea fishing areas that are the subject of this proposal.

Figure 1: Current prohibition on mackerel fishing extends out to 20 miles for the Bering Sea

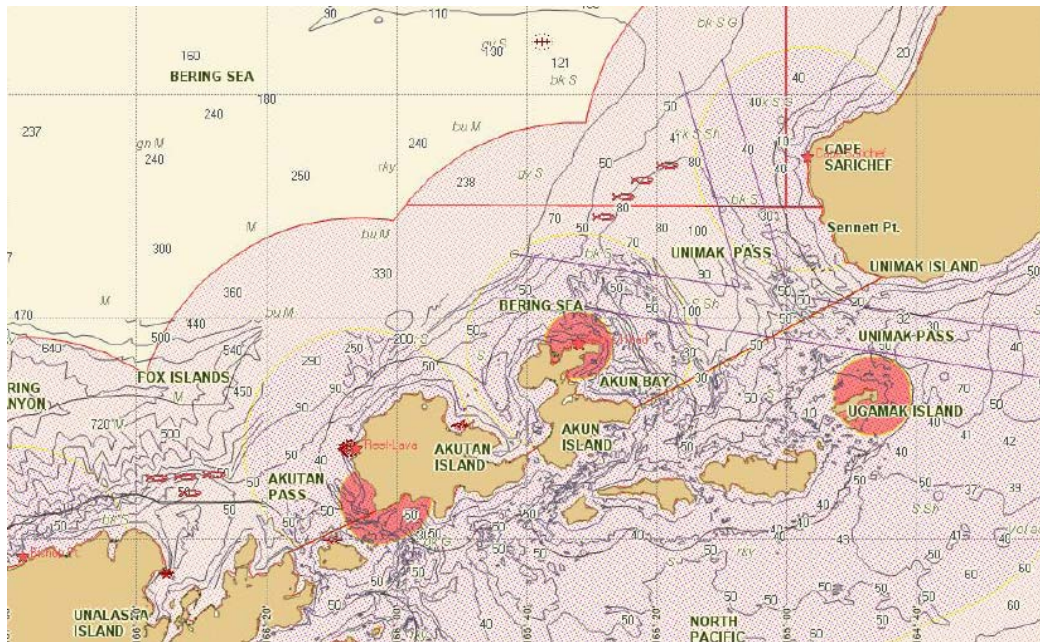
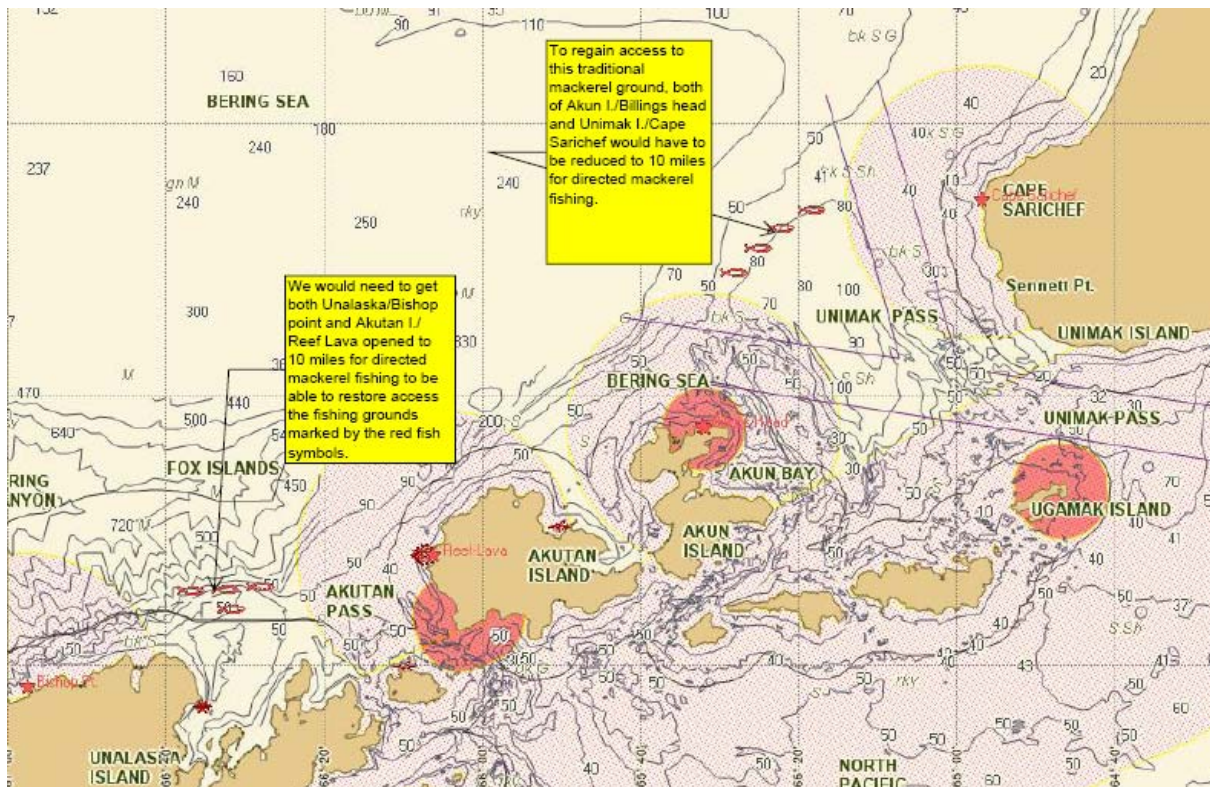


Figure 2: Bering Sea Atka mackerel fishing grounds proposed for directed mackerel fishing between 10 and 20 miles.



Need and Justification for Council Action (Why can't the problem be resolved through other channels?): In recent years, more of the overall Atka mackerel ABC and TAC have been allocated to the Aleutian Islands/Eastern Bering Sea (AI sub-area 541 and EBS). The table below shows this shift in the mackerel TAC to the eastern areas. Note that prior to 2007, the ABC in the Eastern Aleutians/Bering Sea management area allowed for TACs of over 20,000 mt but the actual TAC was set at 7,500 mt. This was done for reasons explained below.

Atka mackerel ABC and TAC 2005-2008

Year	AREA	ABC	TAC
2005	EA/EBS	24,550	7,500
	CA	52,830	35,000
	WA	46,620	20,000
2006	EA/EBS	21,190	7,500
	CA	45,580	35,500
	WA	40,230	20,000
2007	EA/EBS	23,500	23,500
	CA	29,600	29,600
	WA	20,600	9,600
2008	EA/EBS	17,600	17,600
	CA	22,000	22,000
	WA	15,300	15,300

This shift has increased the relative value of the 541 mackerel fishery itself and the overall revenue of the fishery because Area 541 mackerel are more valuable. An agreement to allow the shift of mackerel to the 541 fishery was accomplished through an agreement that removed the potential for a bycatch problem to occur if the mackerel were shifted to the east. Mackerel fishing in the eastern areas has much higher potential for halibut bycatch. So the downside in the past was that the entire mackerel fishery could be closed due to an increase in halibut bycatch. To resolve this, however, the flatfish and mackerel industry's reached a consensus to expand it's the use of its bycatch avoidance program to the mackerel fishery. This allowed the 541 fishery to better manage its halibut bycatch. This allowed for a shift of mackerel TAC to AI 541/Bering Sea because bycatch no longer posed the risk of shutting down the Atka mackerel fishery (closure would have been of the mackerel fishery in all AI management areas)

With the increase in 541 mackerel TAC, additional fishing grounds are needed to allow for the vessels targeting mackerel to spread their effort over a larger area therefore better maintaining their catch rates. Additional grounds would reduce crowding and the situation where all the mackerel vessels are essentially lined up to wait their turn to make the 541 mackerel tow. The current mackerel fishing area at Seguam Pass is essentially a relatively small portion of a <100 fathom bank that falls outside of several overlapping 20 mile rookery circles on the south side of Seguam Pass.

One approach to increasing the fishing grounds at Seguam Pass by allowing some mackerel fishing inside of the 20 nm closed area. This was the subject of our former SSL Proposal 8 to allow increased fishing at Seguam through opening some of the area between 10 and 20 nm outside the Seguam Foraging Area closure. While that proposal has merit, it is of a lower priority relative to re-establishing access to Bering Sea Atka mackerel fishing grounds at Akutan Island/Akun and off Unimak Pass are currently closed to any target fishing for Atka mackerel.

At the time of our earlier proposal, we were not actually aware that the traditional Bering Sea mackerel grounds were actually closed. The closure of the Bering Sea mackerel areas occurred through the closure out to 20 nm of rookeries and haul outs (formerly at 10 miles) outside of Akutan, Akun, and Unimak Islands. This was apparently part of the SSL regulation package that was implemented in 2001 or in subsequent rulemaking that consolidated the SSL regulations. The closure of these areas was clearly off our radar given the low TACs for 541 mackerel during that time period due to bycatch concerns and other factors. Many members of the first sea lion committee will recall that during the development of the 2001 SSL regulation package, NMFS Protected Resources Division was in fact encouraging a shift of mackerel fishing to the Bering Sea grounds in order to reduce potential prey effects on SSL in the Aleutian Islands management areas. Had we realized that the traditional areas of the Bering Sea where mackerel are actually closed out to 20 miles for directed fishing for mackerel, we would have prioritized these grounds over increased area at Seguam Island (Seguam is likely to be more problematic in terms of potential impact on key SSL rookeries in the Aleutian Islands).

The component of this proposal that limits the mackerel harvest in the Bering Sea areas that would be reopened to no more than 50% of the AI sub-area TAC should also help to prevent a disproportional harvest rate of sub-area 541 and the Bering Sea.

Foreseeable Impacts of Proposal (Who wins, who loses?): The mackerel fishery overall (both catcher processor and catcher vessel components) will benefit from this change. This is because with Amendment 80 in place, competitive aspects of the mackerel fishery and potential for shutting other fisheries down through halibut bycatch are no longer of concern. From a sea lion protection perspective, the shift of mackerel TAC to the Eastern AI/Bering Sea management area should serve to reduce catches of mackerel in the Aleutian Islands management to the west where sea lion numbers have continued to decline. Further, the opening of Bering Sea mackerel grounds will reduce the chances of fishing down the mackerel resource in Seguam Pass which now supports the entire 541 fishery.

Are there Alternative Solutions? If so, what are they and why do you consider your proposal the best way of solving the problem? The alternative is to approve the expansion of fishing areas at Seguam Pass, our Proposal number 8. While not as attractive in terms of fishing grounds for Atka mackerel, an allowance for more fishing area at Seguam helps to expand the fishing grounds in conjunction with the increase in Area 541 TAC.

Supporting Data & Other Information. What data are available and where can they be found? Sea lion counts in Aleutian Islands 541 rookeries/ haul outs compared to counts in the Bering Sea rookeries and haul outs that this proposal seeks to access from 10 to 20 miles. Additionally, Protected Resources' judgments in the development of the 2001 SSL regulation package where they were interested in incentives to shift mackerel fishing to its former areas of the Bering Sea in lieu of the Aleutian Islands areas.

Offsetting Measures. OPTIONAL – None because the proposal itself is potentially beneficial to sea lions.

Signature:

